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SUBJECT: IRAQ 201: TURKEY'S INTERESTS AND INFLUENCE IN IRAQ

REF: A. ANKARA 395  
[I](#)B. BAGHDAD 505

Classified By: Acting Counselor for Political-Military Affairs Philip K osnett for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[¶](#)1. (S/NF) SUMMARY: The relationship between the Governments of Iraq and Turkey has improved substantially in the last one and a half years, though it remains fraught with long-standing differences. Ongoing areas of concern include KGK/PKK terrorists in northern Iraq; Kurdish demands to control Kirkuk (and, potentially, its hydrocarbon resources); Turkish and Iraqi Arab angst over Kurdish nationalism and Turkish apprehension about the future of Iraq's Turkmen minority. The Trilateral Security Dialogue shows some promise as a mechanism for intelligence sharing to combat the KGK/PKK. U.S. and Turkish interests in Iraq often but not always coincide. The GoT was a positive, behind-the-scenes player in the negotiations that led to the Security Agreement between the U.S. and Iraq. On the other hand, it played an unhelpful role in recent Iraqi provincial elections through its clandestine financial support of the anti-Kurd al Hadba Gathering, and its support seemed to harden Turkmen positions during negotiations over the Provincial Elections Law. Recent visits of PM Erdogan and President Gul to Iraq and PM Maliki and President Talabani to Turkey are witness to the warming relationship and their shared interest in limiting Erbil's strength. Likewise oil and natural gas deals signed between the KRG and the GoT (to the consternation of the GoI central government) and Turkey's burgeoning economic presence in a host of other non-oil/gas related areas all emphasize the potential rewards of improving relations. End summary.

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TURKEY AND THE KGK/PKK  
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[¶](#)2. (S/NF) Since the mid-1990's Turkey has engaged in cross border operations (CBOs) into Iraq to battle the Kurdish separatist organization PKK (or KGK, as it now calls itself), sending as many as 35,000 troops in 1995 and 50,000 in 1997. In its most recent major ground CBO in February 2008, Turkey sent several thousand soldiers across the border. The operation lasted one week and is reported to have resulted in the deaths of 240 KGK/PKK fighters. Between 1400 and 2000 Turkish troops have been stationed in bases in northern Iraq since the 1990s. Turkish artillery and air units regularly strike KGK/PKK camps and personnel movements in thinly inhabited areas of northern Iraq.

[¶](#)3. (S/NF) For years after the fall of Saddam, Kurdish authorities refused to take any real steps against the KGK/PKK for several reasons: in the short term, invoking the wrath of the KGK/PKK could threaten peace and the increasing prosperity in northern Iraq and deter foreign investment in the region. Over the long term, a Kurd-on-Kurd confrontation would undermine the desire of the Iraqi Kurds for greater

unity among all Kurdish groups. (Fighting between Iraqi Kurds and the PKK in the nineties resulted in at least hundreds of deaths.) For some time, the threat (and reality) of Turkish cross-border operations (CBOs) coupled with the jeopardy posed to economic gains prompted leaders to make mildly critical statements against the KGK/PKK and to even occasionally take limited steps to interfere with KGK/PKK freedom of movement in northern Iraq. In 2006, Foreign Minister Zebari promised his Turkish counterpart that Iraq would get tough with the KGK/PKK, but most Iraqi Kurds continue to believe that a political solution was the only path to resolving the longstanding problem - most likely in the form of a Turkish amnesty for KGK/PKK fighters.

¶4. (C) Following the Coalition occupation of Iraq, the USG decision not to attempt to force the PKK out of the mountainous Iraq-Turkey border region, along with repeated attacks by PKK into Turkey, gave impetus to Turkish conspiracy theorists that the U.S. supported the PKK - or, at best, passively permitted it to attack Turkey from Iraq. In October 2007 and again in October 2008 KGK/PKK fighters based in northern Iraq attacked Turkish border garrisons in Turkey, resulting in the deaths of 17 Turkish soldiers in 2007 and 15 in 2008. These incidents inflamed the passions of the Turkish public. Fearing a full-on Turkish invasion, the GOI and the KRG agreed to stepped-up efforts against the KGK/PKK.

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#### TRILATERAL SECURITY DIALOGUE

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¶5. (S//NF) In an effort to reinvigorate GOT-GOI coordination against the PKK - and in response to PM Maliki's angst over a jump in direct GOT-KRG ties - in November 2008 the GOT, GOI, and USG agreed to reinstitute a trilateral security process aimed at combating the PKK, kicking off with a ministerial-level meeting in Baghdad. A Working Group of the subcommittee meets on a weekly or bi-weekly basis. The second Ministerial-level meeting is scheduled to take place on April 11. In the context of that dialogue, Iraq (including the KRG) has taken some tentative steps toward cooperating with the GoT in the provision of actionable intelligence against the KGK/PKK. Discussions are now focused on establishing a tripartite intelligence-sharing office in Erbil, under the aegis of the trilateral security committee.

¶6. (S/NF) In 2007, the U.S. began substantial intelligence sharing with Turkish authorities and began providing ISR support to their artillery attacks and sorties into northern Iraq and against the PKK, resulting in a marked improvement in relations.

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#### AN INDEPENDENT KURDISTAN AND THE STATUS OF KIRKUK

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¶7. (C) One of Turkey's greatest fears is an independent Kurdistan on its south-eastern border. In a March 2007 interview, KRG President Masoud Barzani told Turkish NTV that Turkey and the world should just get used to an independent Kurdistan that, Barzani suggested, encompasses some 40 million Kurds in Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria. Since that time, however, Barzani has also made comments stressing the KRG's commitment to remaining a part of Iraq. We assess that most senior KRG leaders understand that a unilateral declaration of Kurdish independence would almost certainly result in an immediate intervention of troops from Ankara, Tehran, and Baghdad as well as an economic strangulation of the region. In March 2009, President Talabani, while in Istanbul, dismissed the idea of an independent Kurdistan as simply "a dream in poems."

¶ 8. (C) The threat of the KRG controlling Kirkuk has long prompted Turkish leaders to make dramatic statements about the status of the City. They fear that if Kirkuk and its vast oil reserves come under the control of Kurdish leaders, the likelihood of the KRG severing its ties to the Republic of Iraq increases exponentially. In the years after the fall of Saddam, Turkey repeatedly said that Kurdish control of Kirkuk is a red-line that would likely result in Turkish troops crossing into Iraq. In recent years, the GoT pushed for a delay in the Article 140 process on the status of Kirkuk and in 2006, the Turkish Defense Minister warned the GoI against "imposing an unrealistic future on Kirkuk."

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THE TURKMEN  
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¶ 9. (C) The Iraqi Turkmen are a distinct Turkic ethnic group living mostly in the cities of Kirkuk, Erbil, Tal Afar, and Mosul. They are one of largest of Iraq's small ethnic groups; however, estimates of their numbers vary dramatically, from 222,000 to two million. Turkmen are roughly divided between Sunni and Shia. Some Iraqis dismiss Turkish concern for the safety and status of the Turkmen as merely cover for GOT involvement in Iraqi politics aimed fundamentally at preventing the emergence of an independent Kurdistan. Yet concern for the safety of the Turkmen is not without merit. They have undergone decades of assimilation campaigns in Iraq.

¶ 10. (S/NF) In the 1970's, all Turkish language schools were closed and in the 80's Saddam declared their language officially banned. In the post-Saddam Iraq, the government of Turkey has helped fund such political organizations as the Iraqi Turkmen Front, which opposes the proposed annexation of Kirkuk to the Kurdistan Regional Government and Iraqi federalism, to the extent that it provides either Kurdish or Arab control over Turkmen-inhabited areas. Of more concern, in the January 2009 provincial elections, the Turks clandestinely supported the anti-Kurdish al Hadba Gathering political party in Nineva, and its support seemed to harden Turkmen positions during negotiations over the Provincial Elections Law. Both Baghdad and Erbil recognize the GoT's exercise of influence in Iraq. In an April 2007, interview with Al-Arabiyah television, Barzani warned Turkey that "there are 30 million (sic) Kurds in Turkey. If they

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interfere in Kirkuk over just a couple thousand (sic) Turkomans, we will interfere in Diyarbakir and other cities in Turkey."

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ADVOCATE ON SHARED U.S. GOALS  
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¶ 11. (S) Turkey is second only to the United States in the influence it has in the KRG and, perhaps, third behind the U.S. and Iran in its overall influence in the rest of the country. Turkey has been an occasional advocate on some of our shared interests - especially in the final weeks preceding our signing a Security Agreement with the GoI in November 2008. During that time, Turkish Special Envoy to Iraq Murat Ozcelik engaged in a form of shuttle diplomacy between Sunni leader Vice President Tarik al Hashimi, PM al-Maliki and Ambassadors Crocker and Satterfield, mostly as an advocate for the marginalized Sunnis. Turkey's role and influence in Iraq is growing and will continue to expand as our troop levels decrease.

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HIGH-LEVEL VISITS BETWEEN TURKEY AND IRAQ  
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¶12. (C) The exchange of high-level visitors between the two countries is also evidence of improving relations. Prime Minister Maliki and President Talabani have each visited Turkey twice in the last 18 months. PM Erdogan visited Iraq in July 2008 when he and Maliki signed a strategic partnership agreement to cooperate in the fields of regional security, fighting KGK/PKK terrorism, controlling the borders, and ensuring joint interests in terms of oil and water resources, border crossings, trade exchanges, cultural activities, and the role of Turkish companies in reconstructing Iraq. To this end, the two countries formed a High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council calling for annual prime ministerial meetings and quarterly ministerial meetings. To date, however, there has not been significant follow-up on the Council and no ministerial meetings other than the Trilateral Security Ministerial have taken place. President Gul visited Iraq March 23-24 during which the GoT and GoI signed an Economic Partnership Agreement aimed at boosting bilateral trade between the two countries.

¶13. (U) Water issues continue to be a point of friction between Iraq and Turkey. Since 1986, when Turkey completed tunnels to divert an estimated one-fifth of the water from the Euphrates River into the Ataturk Dam Reservoir, Syria and Iraq have complained about Turkish interference with their right to water. In March 2008, the three countries established a water commission to develop projects for the fair and effective use of trans-border water resources. Iraq participated in the Fifth World Water Forum in Istanbul March 16 to 22 with a delegation headed by President Talabani. Vatan Turkish newspaper reported that Presidents Gul and Talabani met in Istanbul during the forum and Gul said the two countries should take advantage of ways to cooperate with each other. He told Talabani "we will share happiness if we act rationally; we will share sorrow if we don't act accordingly."

¶14. (C) Turkish Deputy Chief of Military Staff (DCHOD) Hasan Igsiz visited Iraq on March 4, 2009 and met with Iraqi MoD Abdul Qadir, Chief of Staff Babakir Zebari, and CG Odierno, following a visit by the Iraqi DCHOD General Nasir Abadi in ¶2008. The main issues discussed were further cooperation between the Turkish military and the Iraqi Army and cooperation against the PKK.

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A GROWING ECONOMIC RELATIONSHIP  
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¶15. (C) The last months have been marked by warming relations and growing economic opportunities between the GoT and the KRG. Turkish Prime Minister Reep Tayyip Erdogan discussed petroleum contracting during his July 2008 visit to Iraq. However, as Ambassador Crocker warned Ozcelik (ref b), cutting deals directly with the KRG will result in Turkish companies being black-listed by the Iraqi central government.

¶16. (C) Turkey remains a natural and active trading partner with Iraq. Currently Kartet, a Turkish power company, supplies 100% of Iraq's Dahuk province's electricity in exchange for heavy fuel oil from the Bayji Oil Refinery. Turkey has shown strong interest in Iraq's hydrocarbon

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resources and Turkish oil companies are currently active in the Kurdistan areas of Iraq. Iraq exports approximately 20 percent of its crude oil through the Kirkuk to Ceyhan pipeline. In addition to hydrocarbon resources, Turkish contractors have built housing units in Erbil and are building a luxury hotel in Erbil as well. Trade along the Iraqi-Turkish border is vital to south eastern Turkey and northern Iraq. Turkish companies are some of the most active international companies in Iraq.

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